

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE HELPS PROMOTE TOLERANCE, UNDERSTANDING

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WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 13-- People from different religious backgrounds can achieve a better understanding of one another's beliefs and cultural traditions through interfaith dialogue, says U.S. State Department official Kareema Daoud.

"Talking to other faiths makes us stronger in our convictions and helps us to understand our neighbors better," Daoud said during an August 4 USINFO Webchat. "It is a dialogue and not a compromise. I have a position, you have a position."

Daoud began the webchat, which was sponsored by the State Department, by introducing herself as an American Muslim who sees no contradiction between her religious affiliation and her full participation in U.S. society. "I, for one, believe it is possible to successfully integrate my Muslim identity with my American identity, and I am part of a majority [of U.S. Muslims] who believe so," she said.

A recent public opinion poll of Muslims in the United States indicates that most believe that the principles of Islam and the obligations of U.S. citizenship are entirely compatible, she added.

Daoud noted that there is no prohibition in the United States against wearing the hijab -- the head scarf favored by many, though not all, Muslim women. "I thank God that we have the freedom to practice our religion freely in the United States," said Daoud. "Some of my closest friends ... wear the hijab. No one has the right to tell you not to wear your hijab in the U.S.A.," because U.S. law protects the wearing of religious garb, "and the hijab is not an exception." (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2007&m=August&x=20070806141303ajesrom0.6975214>).)

Muslims in the United States today are "doctors, engineers, teachers, government officials, journalists, lawyers, entrepreneurs," she observed. Some are U.S.-born, while others are immigrants. "Muslim women who were born and raised here have an American mind-set and mentality: they believe that men and women should have equal privileges and rights," said Daoud. U.S.-born Muslim women are no different from non-Muslim women except that they usually pray five times a day, might wear a hijab and attend a mosque, she pointed out.

"Because religion is primarily a private matter, a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, etc., can all pray the way they deem fit and appropriate for their faith tradition, and all still be American," said Daoud. "An immigrant coming to this country, too, can practice their religion without restriction." The only difference between native-born citizens and immigrants "is the mind-set," she added. "If you feel American and behave [as an] American and accept Americans and American life, then you are American

and you are accepted accordingly.” (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=November&x=20061129163534GLnesnoM0.5619928>).)

Interfaith activities often are launched by nongovernmental organizations, grassroots movements and civil-society groups, according to Daoud. “Governments can help in supporting these groups, but the work toward understanding and peaceful coexistence needs to be conceived, initiated, believed in, built and maintained from the ground up,” she said. Interfaith events in the United States include conferences, spiritual retreats, luncheons with guest speakers and dinners on college campuses and at private homes.

In response to a question about religious fanaticism, Daoud said she believes that “anyone who is a violent extremist operates outside of his/her faith community, [and] he/she does not define or represent that faith. I do not think these individuals, who by their very nature are isolationist, should be part of -- nor want to be part of -- interfaith dialogue. The good news is that they are the minority.”

However, “interfaith dialogue amongst the rest of the religious population is worthwhile and beneficial,” she said. “I might explain my purpose in life differently than you do, but if we both agree that doing good for mankind is a core component” of one’s life, “then our intentions are the same; the roads [are] just different -- and that is something we can agree on.”

She advised those attending an interfaith event to “keep an open mind and ear, be respectful and treat others as you would like to be treated.”

Daoud quoted two passages from the Quran, the Muslim holy book, in support of diversity and tolerance. The Quran “states that God created us of different tribes and peoples, so that we may get to know one another,” she said. “If God had wanted, He would have made us all of one religion or one ethnicity, but He did not. There is beauty in diversity and in recognizing the good that all bring to this life. Not everyone chooses Islam as their path toward reaching God and/or a sense of fulfillment,” and this “is what God had intended.”

Also, the Quran says “there is no compulsion in religion,” she said. “To me my faith, and to you yours.”

The 19th-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill “once stated that the suppression of any voice is the deprivation of all society,” said Daoud. “All in all, interfaith [dialogue] serves to enrich the individual, not undermine him or her.”

A transcript (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2007&m=August&x=20070815133032xjsnommiS0.9725305>) of the webchat is available on the USINFO Webchat Station (<http://usinfo.state.gov/usinfo/Products/Webchats.html>), which also has information on previous and upcoming webchats.

For further information about interfaith activities in the United States, visit the Web sites of the Interfaith Youth Core (<http://www.ifyc.org/>), the Buxton Initiative (<http://www.buxtoninitiative.org/>), and the North American Interfaith Network (<http://www.nain.org/>).

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